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Nick Dodds
(University of Cumbria)

Reframing the Graphic Memoir: How
does the comic-strip artist negotiate
modality and fidelity in the depiction of
personal and historical narratives?

Presentation of current doctoral research & studio practice

This thesis investigates the potency of the comic strip as a medium to address real-life narratives, which are “fabricated in and through drawing and design” (Whitlock & Poletti:v).

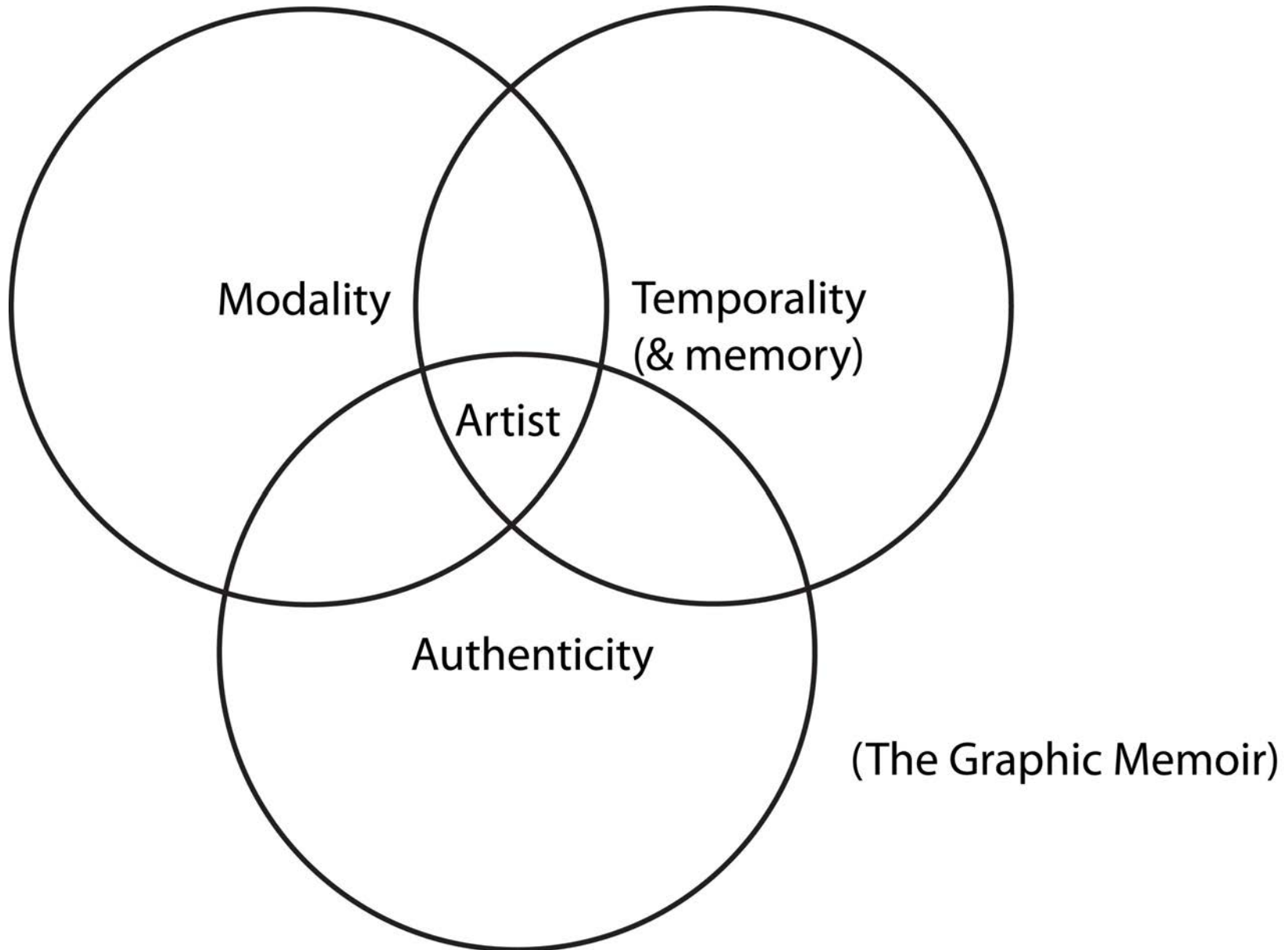
Defining the Graphic Memoir*

The term 'memoir' is preferred over 'autobiography' as it refers to selected memories or episodes taken from life, rather than the story of a life . . .

. . . and best describes what will be the outcome of practice-led research.

*also referred to in comic-book scholarship as *autobiographix*, *autography*, *autographics*, *autobiocomics*, graphic life writing etc . . .

Practice-led research - themes



Modality

The formal & structural properties of the comic strip and their application within the graphic memoir genre;

- page multi-frame & readership control
- the comics graphic-code
- anchorage > the relay between text & image
- representational style

Temporality (& memory)

Chronology, tempo and issues concerning the depiction of time and memory within the memoir;

- clock time/subjective time/psychic time in comic book narratives
- the panel as time controller
- the transitional influence of negative space

Authenticity

How does the stylized and iconographic content of the graphic work complicate perceptions of fidelity?

- the authorial 'pact' and/or 'performed integrity' of the artist (Refaie:171)
- historical accuracy and/or 'memory retrieval'.
- relation of the graphic text to other memoir texts or 'truth' discourses.
- the drawn image v other visual means of capturing real life people and events.

The Checkweighman

Pilgrimage from Nenthead (Chester Armstrong)

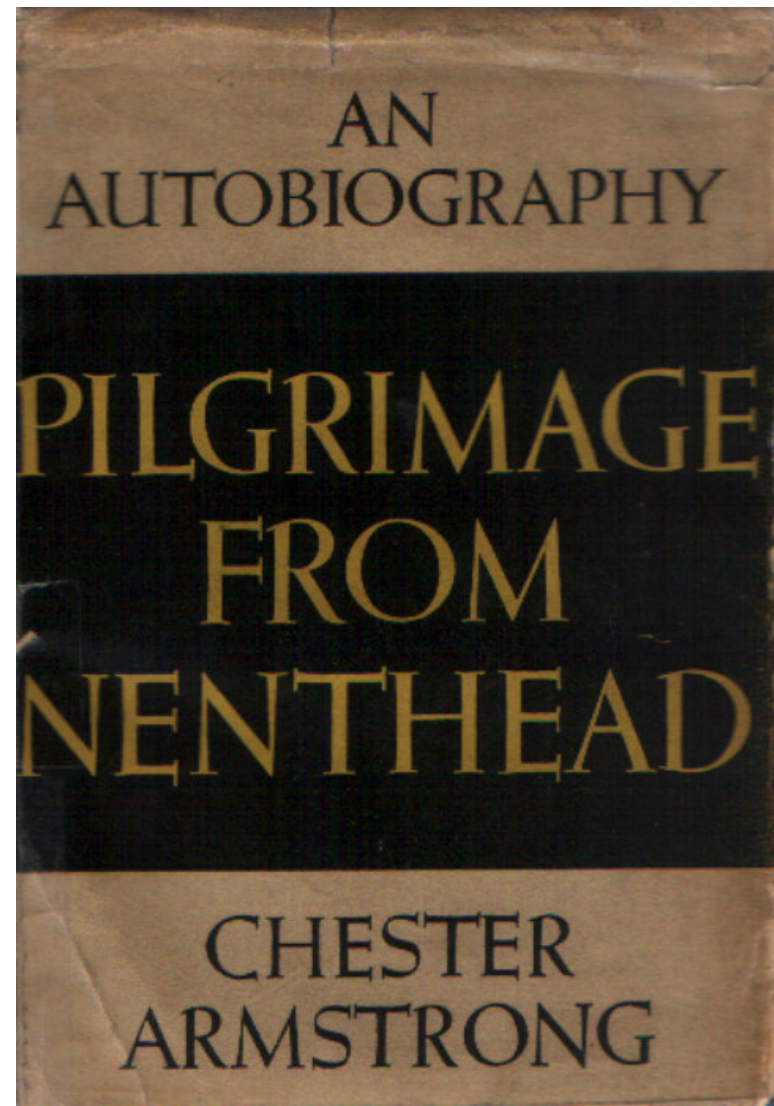
working class memoir (1928)

Key themes from PFN

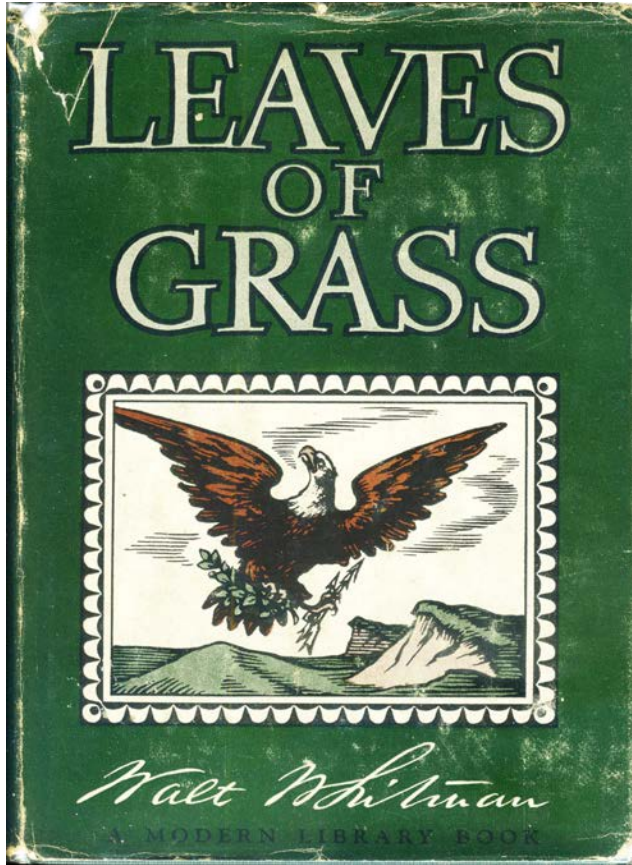
- mining community
- growing politicalization
- autodidactism
- rationalisation & enlightenment

Project in hand

Graphic adaptation of *Pilgrimage text* - a work that intertwines familial & sociopolitical storylines.

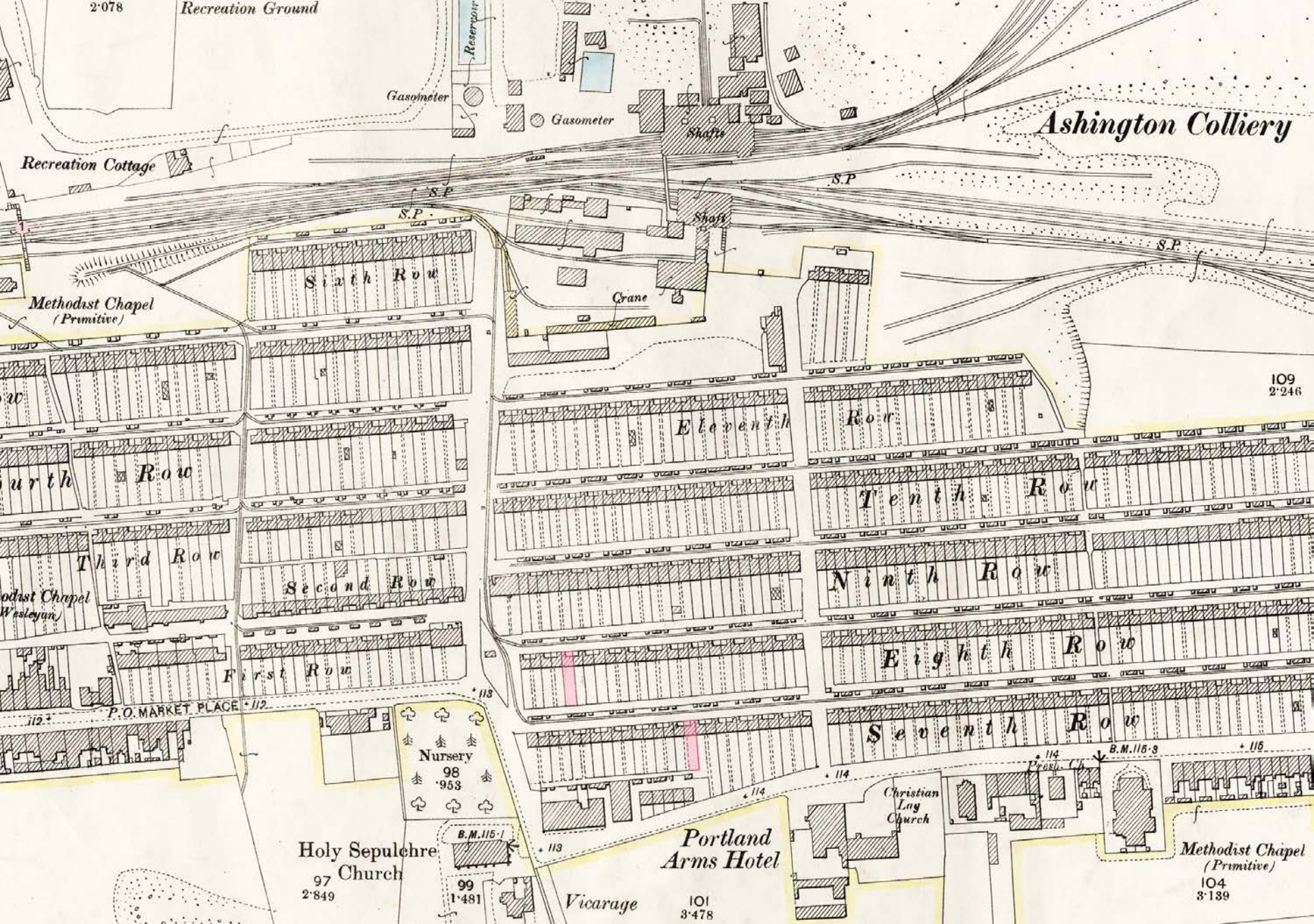


autodidactism & the life of the mind

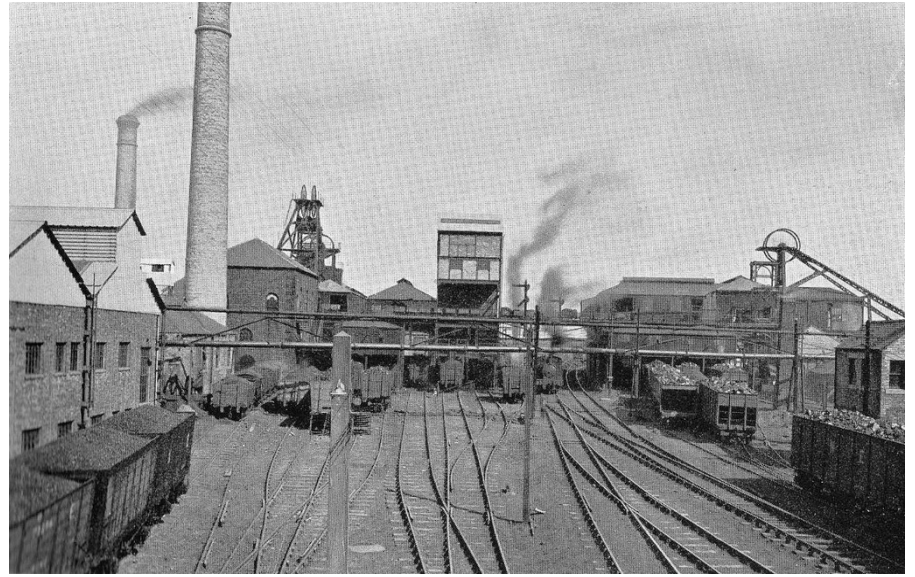
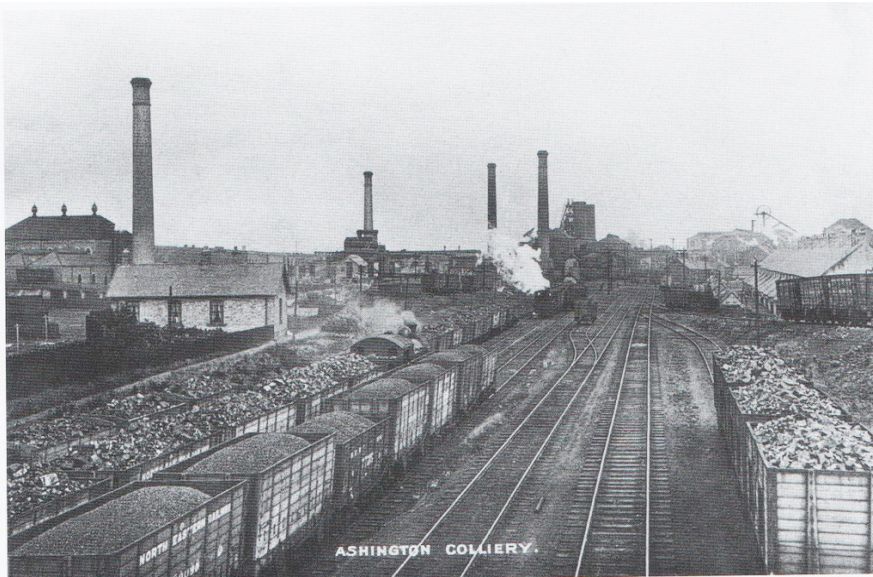


In 1898, aged 30, Chester co-founded the ***Ashington Debating and Literary Improvement Society*** (ADLIS) with John Moffett Gillians, with a modus-operandi to debate social and philosophical issues, and dissect the keynote modernist works of the day (Armstrong:121-173).

The ***Morpeth Herald*** archive.



Ashington Colliery, Northumberland 1897



textual & pictorial resources for time period



Psychogeography (from Guy Debord SI) - how the geographical location and/or environment effects the emotions and behaviour of individuals

PROLOGUE (12 pgs)

Text from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

Montage sequence of (unseen) carpenter building a set of bookshelves circa 1900 - as indicated by tools, mise-en-scene detail etc > intercut with single panels/images that signal key themes and details of colliery life for the time period, including: pit-head buildings, train sidings, allotments, colliery rows, domestic detail, carousel horses, empty meeting rooms, school class-rooms, flora and fauna, slag-heap, mine-workings, close-ups > ends with a graphic match sequence as woodgrain merges into Cumberland fells (and Chapter 1).

1: PILGRIMAGE FROM NENTHEAD (24 pgs)

1. Transition from Prologue into remote beauty of Alston moor (insertion of Chester's narration).

2. Chesters birth (1968) & family > scenes of father (William) & mother (Elizabeth) & home life in Chapel House, Nenthead.

3. William & the weekly newspaper (Christian Herald); ritual - the transformative power of words.

4. 1st visit to Ashington to see relatives - witnesses sinking of Carl pit (Chester aged 5).

5. Hated school days > the 'cork hand' of the master.

6. Community & religion at Nenthead (the world of adults).

7. William's work at the lead-mine and his failing health > the poisonous yellow dust episode.

8. The leaving for Ashington for economic and health reasons on a wagonette (Nov 1881, Chester 13 yrs) > a wrench for one and all.

The Checkweighman

2: HARDEST WORK UNDER HEAVEN (24 pgs)

1. Present (insertion of Author POV) > domestic scenes > dynamic between Author & Eve.

2. Cut back to family arrival in Ashington - early impressions (the barbarian tribe), Elizabeth's upset at Chester's employment at the pit.

3. Extended sequence of Chesters walk to heap-stead and first day on the screens at Carl pit (Dec 1881 13yrs).

4. Transition into expositional sequence on 19th Century mining industry (Author's narration).

5. Cut back to Chester's narration - anger & impotence at being drawn into the industrial machine. The risk to life & limb as a common occurrence.

6. The teenage Chester > exploring the Northumbrian countryside > quotidian scenes of family life.

7. The Lending library at the Mechanics Institute > montage > Defoe, Cooper, Verne etc. The pull of literature & world of imagination.

8. End on single panel > segway into present & Eve reading.

3: THE LARGEST PIT VILLAGE (24 pgs)

Present (field visit to Ashington) > cut between scenes of Author and Eve conducting a walking tour around key sights and snapshots of Ashington past > interspersed with Chester's narration.

1. Chester's early observations of Ashington pit village (1881).

2. The rapid expansion of Ashington and ACC (coal company) > industrial scale of operations.

3. Exploded view - birds eye view of Ashington, showing scale of pit.

4. The 'compound' - colliery housing & paternal role of ACC.

5. The role & daily ritual of the mother and housewife (focus on Elizabeth).

6. The Primitive Methodist hierarchy - link between the church and positions of power in the colliery.

7. Emerging sporting, community organisations and cultural activities.

8. The 'Bowling Field' > outdoor events (Shakespeare plays) > fairground > 1st sighting of Rose

4: LOVE & THRIFT (24 pgs)

1. Chester gets on > becomes an assistant checkweighman (1888) on the nightshift.

2. Chester attends the Primitive Method chapel - meets Rose.

3. Courtship between Chester & Rose > setting up home (marriage 1893) > Elizabeth's reaction, depicted as an extended (silent) sequence.

4. Making ends meet as a working class couple > thrift.

5. Becomes a fully-fledged Checkweighman at Carl Pit (flashback to 5yr old self).

6. The role of the checkweighman (segway into the idea in religious iconography > weighing of souls?).

7. Turning point > a crisis of faith > Chester renounces religious doctrine. (pivotal sequence in narrative)

8. Moves towards literary emancipation & autodidacticism.

5: THE COTTAGE AND THE CASTLE (24 pgs)

1. The effect of early modernism (enlightenment) and new science (Darwin etc) on religious doctrine - covered by Chester in PPN.

2. The collector > Chester & Rose visits to Newcastle to buy second-hand books > building a library (link with prologue sequence).

3. Knowledge & power > culture as a force for equality > challenging the capitalist hegemony.

4. Links between the themes found in literature and the politics of the left (see Jonathan Rose).

5. The zeal of the autodidact > finding the time to read > pressures of shift work & family.

6. Forays into the writings of Walt Whitman & Edward Carpenter.

7. Chester's thoughts on socialism > the cottage & the castle.

8. End with an extended sequence of the miners picnic in Morpeth > different generations of the family > focus in on sights and sounds > banners, political speeches etc.

6: FOOD FOR THE IDEALIST (24 pgs)

1. Friendship between Gillians & Chester leads to the formation of the Ashington Debating & Literary Improvement Society (ADLIS).

2. Early ADLIS (from Autumn 1898) > establishing a new society within Ashington.

3. Growth > operational aspects of ADLIS > organisation and accounts of meetings (Morpeth Herald).

4. Key regular contributors & characters at ADLIS meetings.

5. A typical session/programme > range & scope of subjects covered

6. Change of tone > death & funeral of Elizabeth (1900 - aged 66yrs).

7. Visit to ADLIS by influential Harold Lanski. Correspondence between Chester & Lanski - encouragement to write?

8. Ends on sequence as Chester contemplates (self-doubt) and writes memoir > close-up on raw PPN manuscript.

Principal Characters

Past

Chester Armstrong
William Armstrong (Chester's father)
Elizabeth Armstrong (Chester's Mother)
Rose Young (Chester's wife)
John Gillians (co-founder of Ashington Debating & Literary Improvement society)

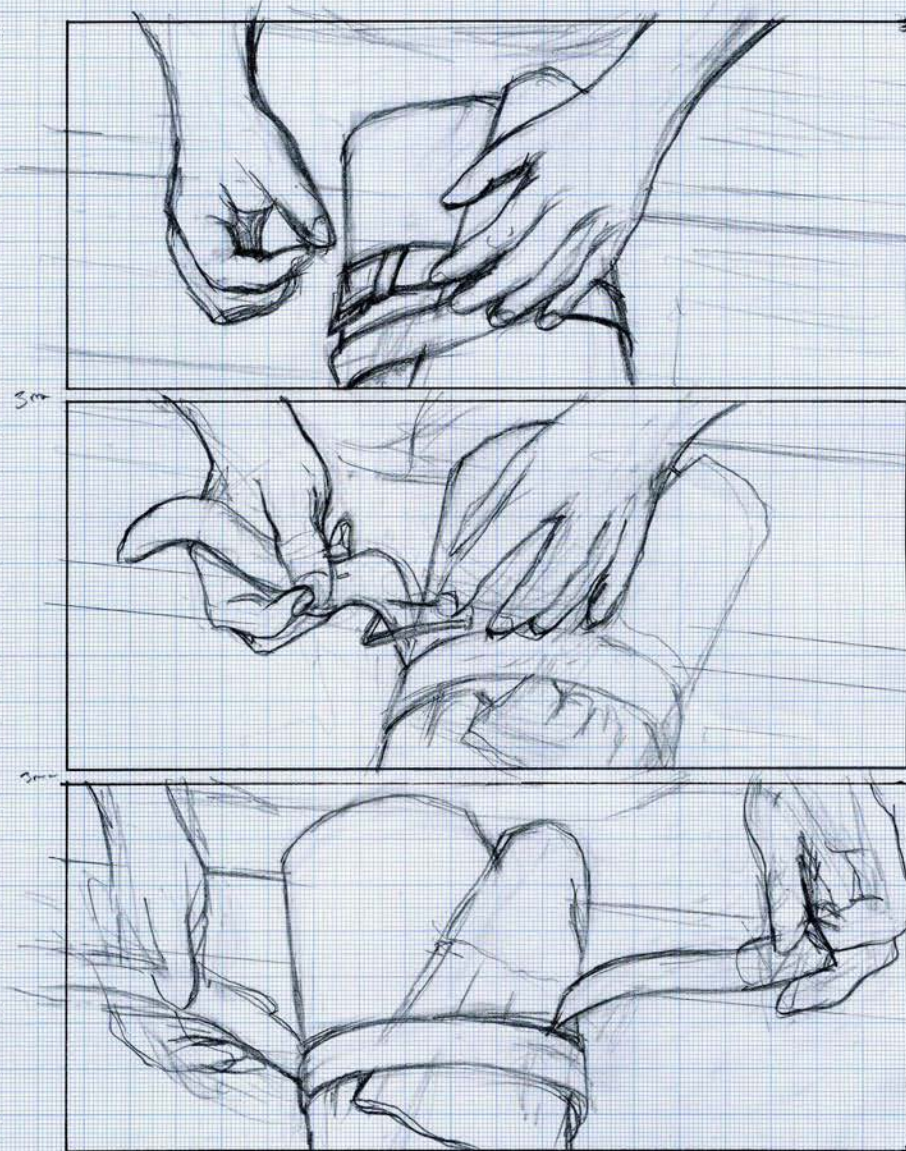
Present

Author
Eve (authors daughter)

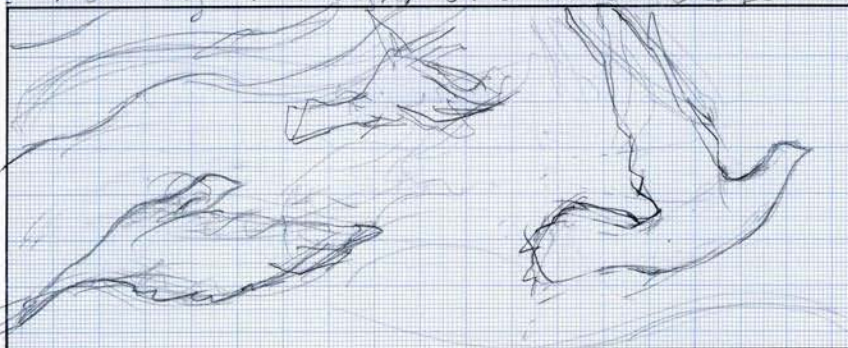
EPILOGUE (12 pgs)

Segway into present & published 1938 copy of PPN on Author desk > annual family holiday on the Northumberland coast.

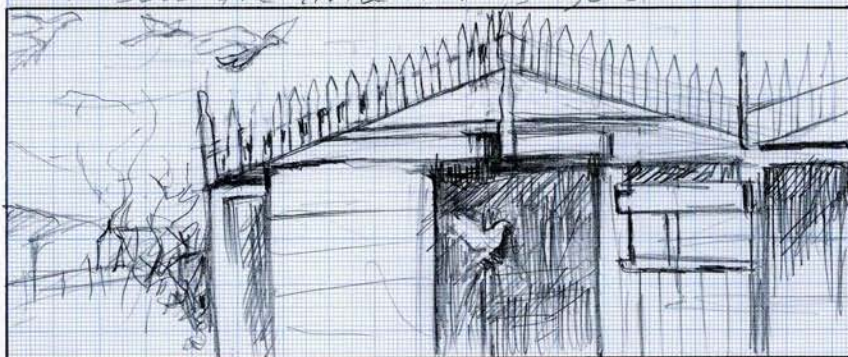
Sequence (silent) > POV of Author > coastal walk > gradual merging of present into past shown by landscape details > ends with old man at allotments...



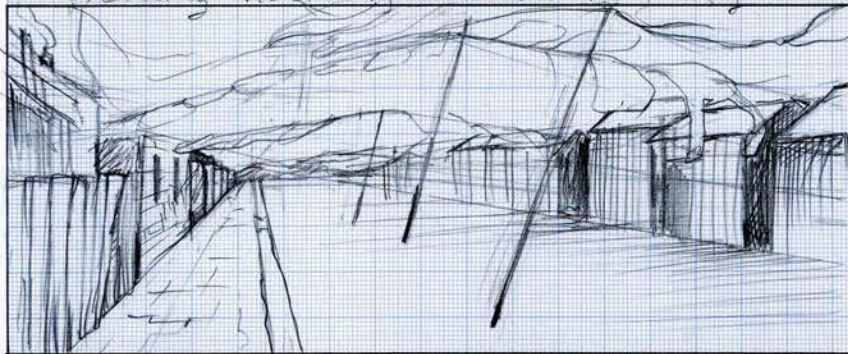
Roaming in thought over the universe



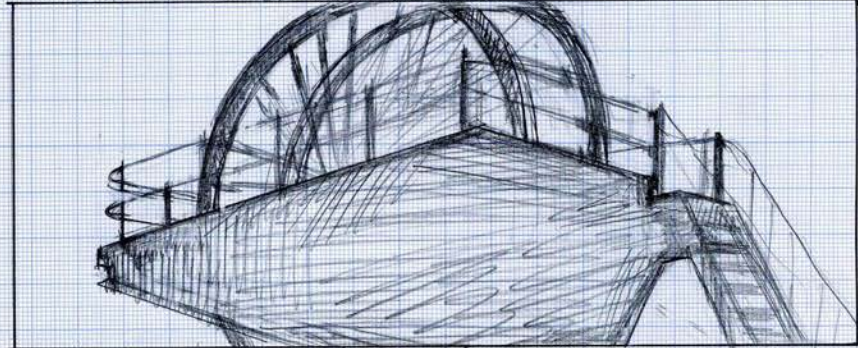
I saw the little that is good



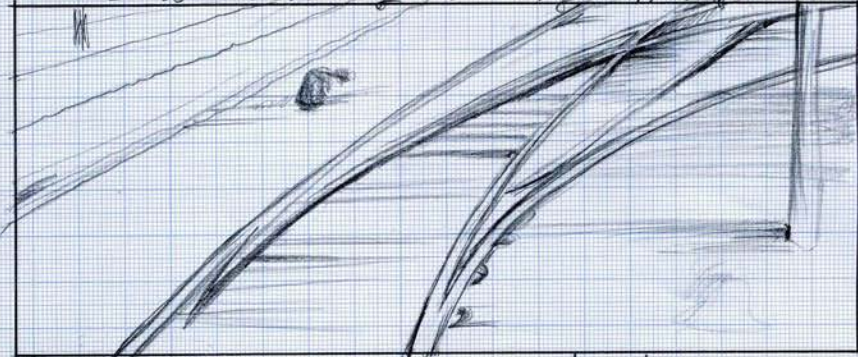
steadily hastening towards mortality



And the vast all that is called evil



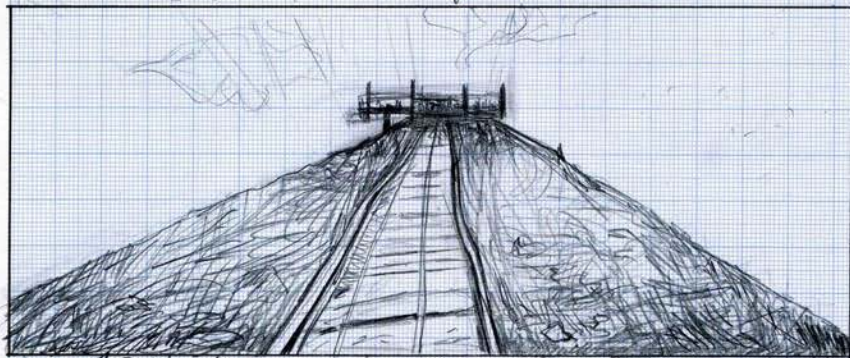
I saw hastening to merge itself



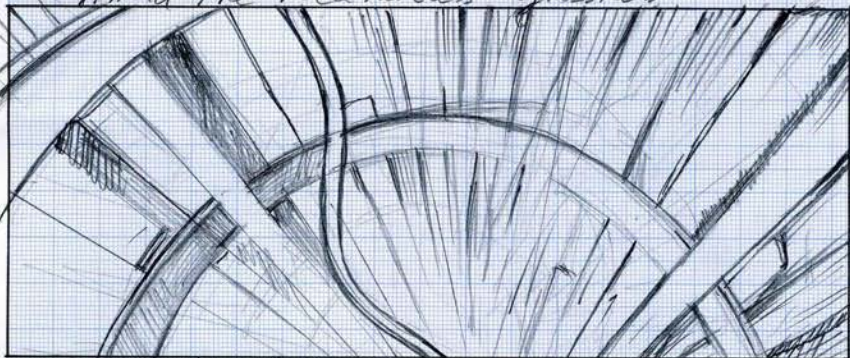
and become lost and dead



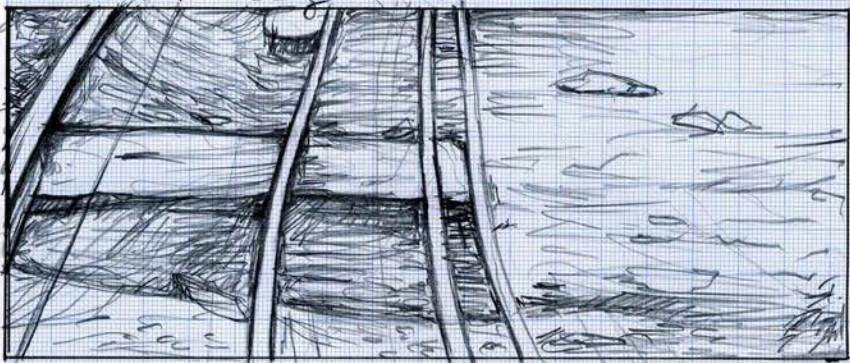
In this broad earth of ours



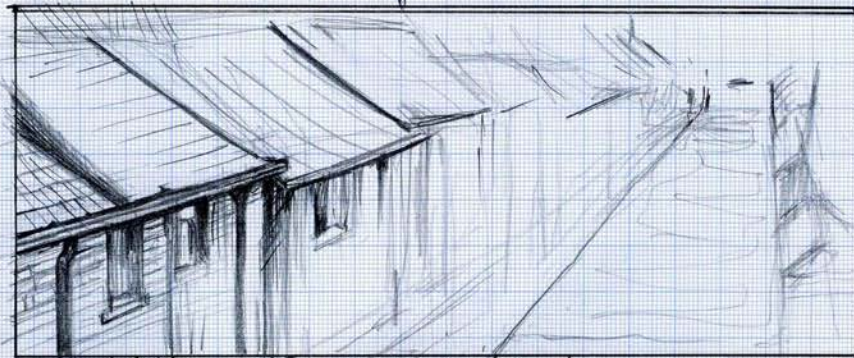
Around the measureless grossness



and the slag



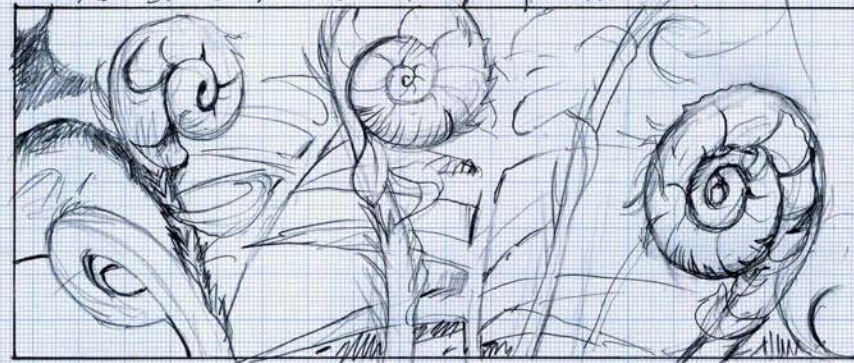
Enclosed and safe



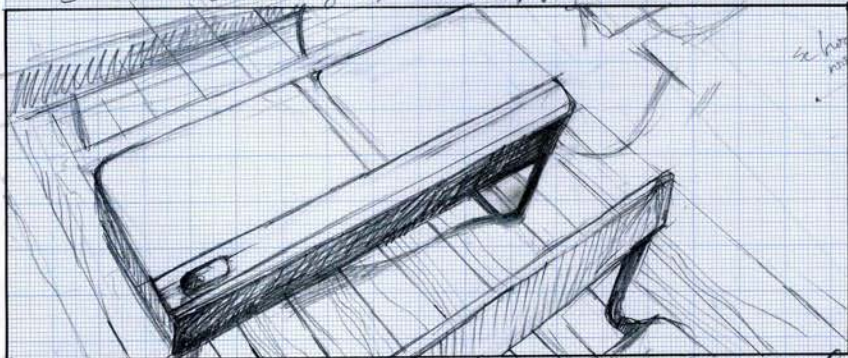
Within its central heart



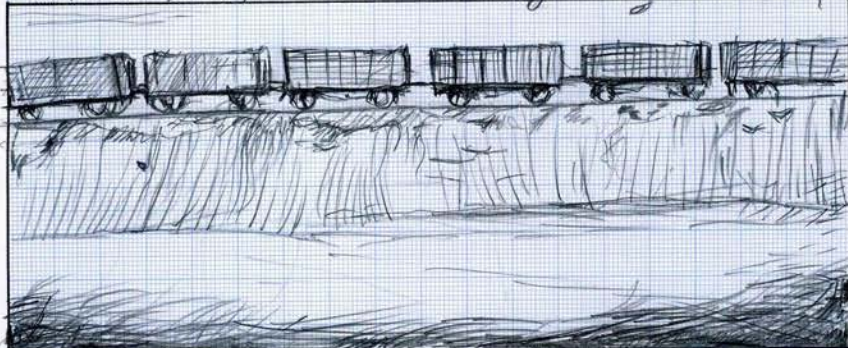
Nestles the seed perfection



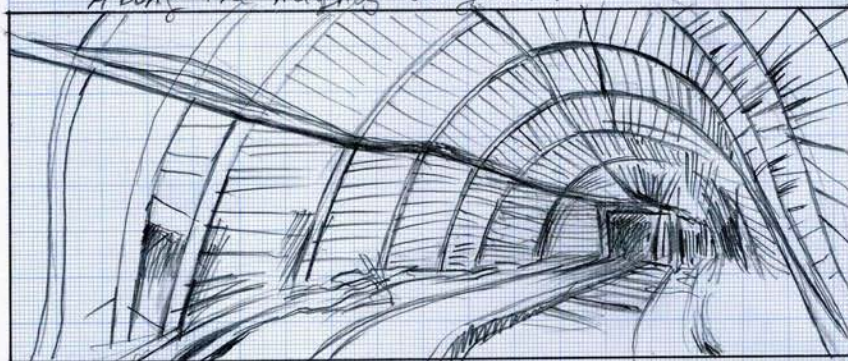
O the blest eyes, the happy hearts



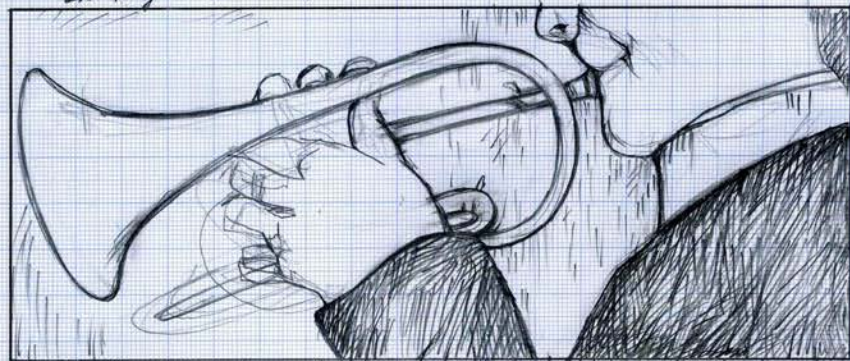
That see, that know the guiding thread so fine



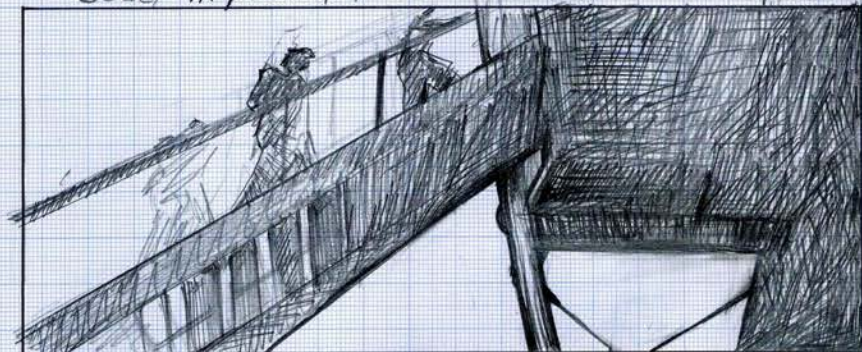
Along the mighty labyrinth



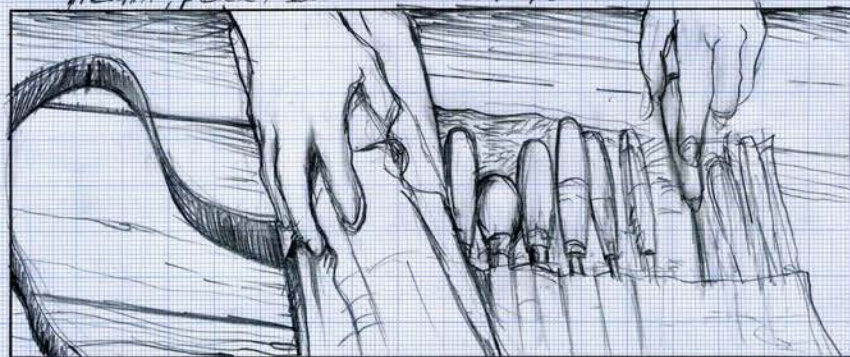
In thy ensemble, whatever else withhold not from us.

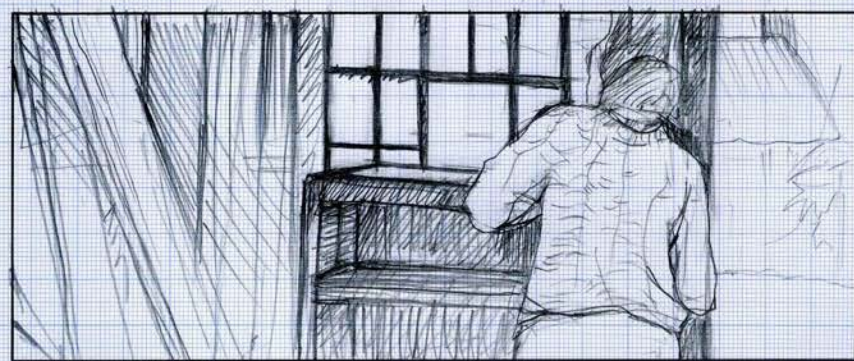
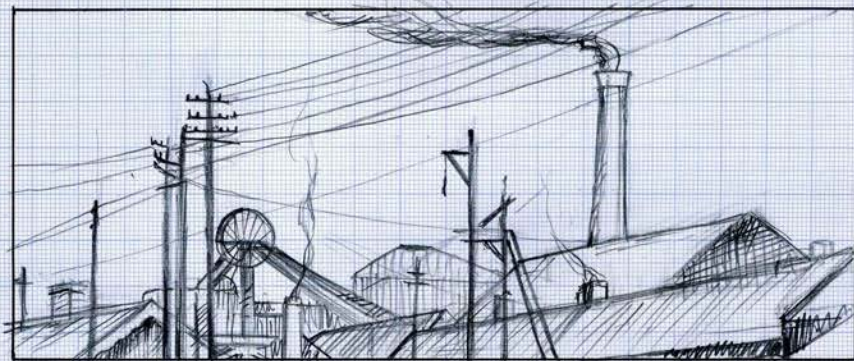
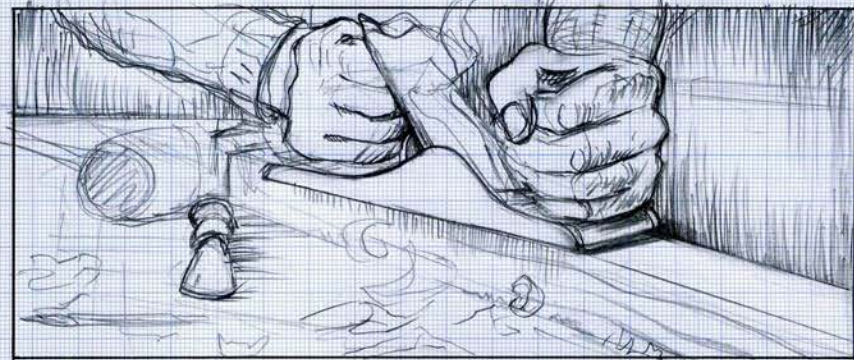
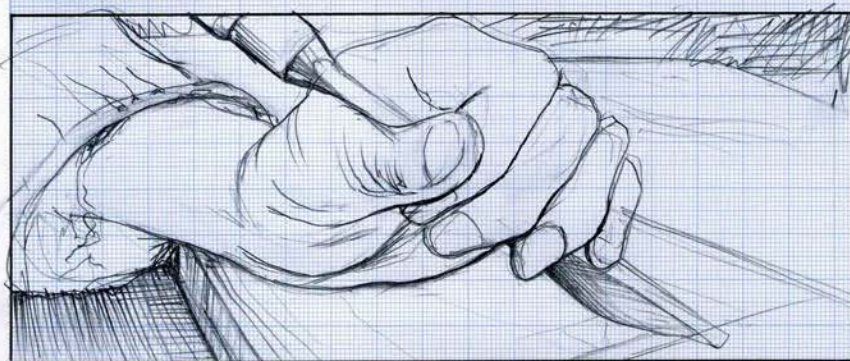
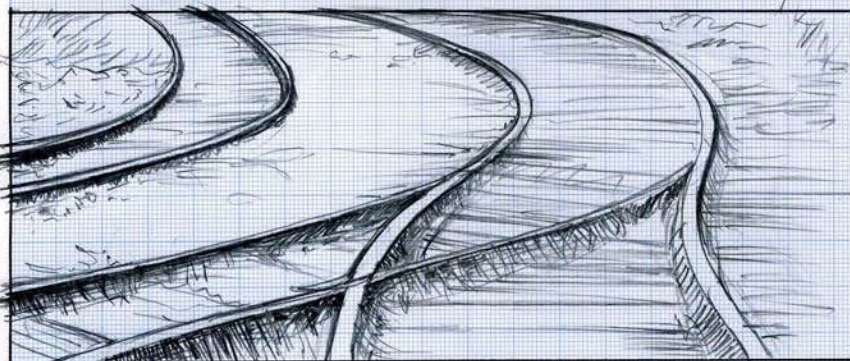
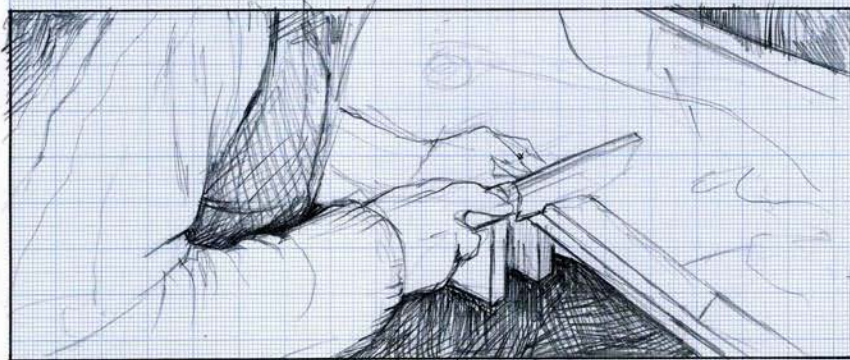


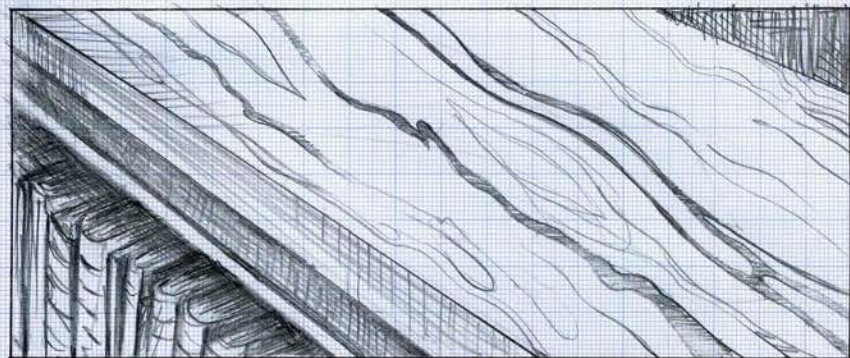
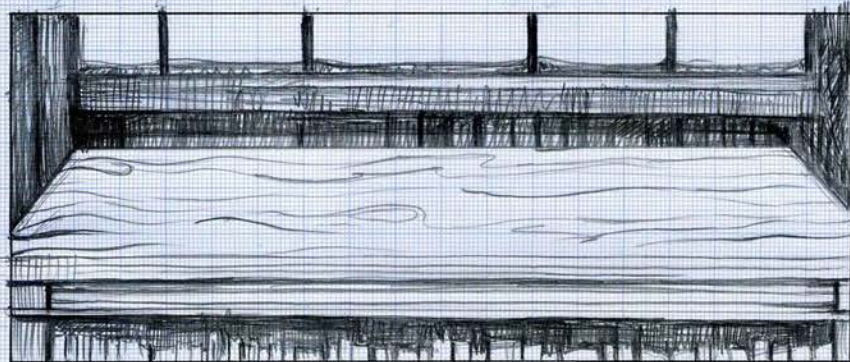
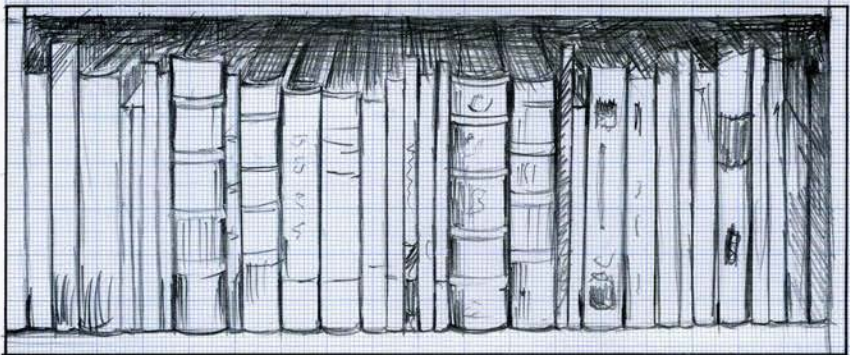
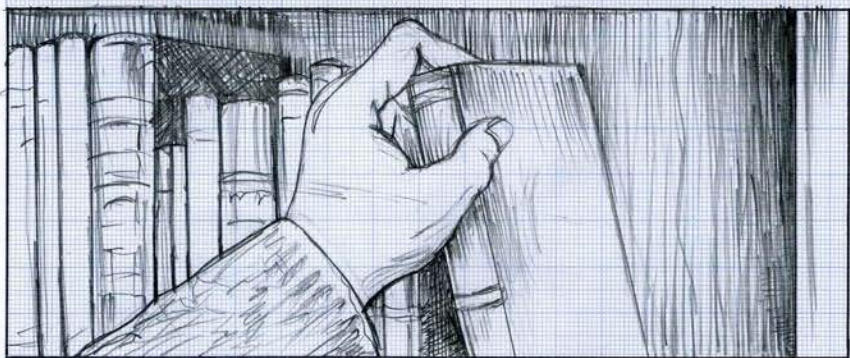
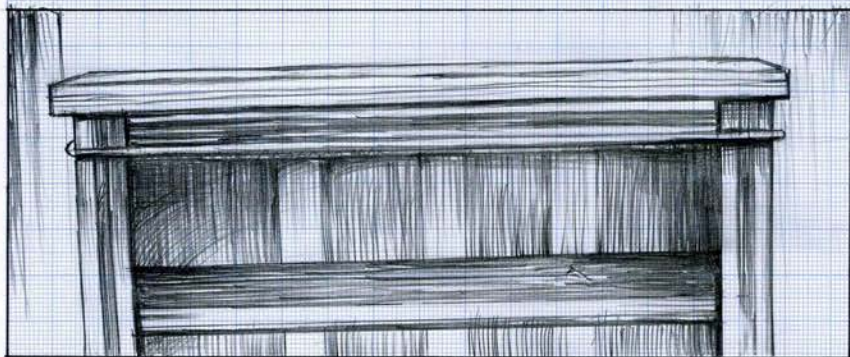
Belief in plan of free enclosed in time and space



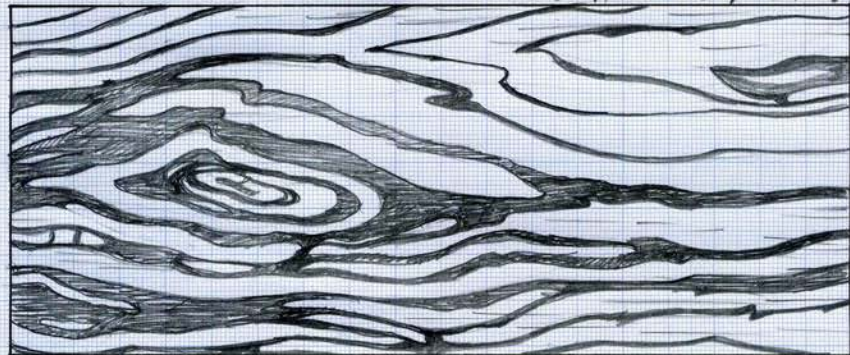
Health, peace, salvation universal



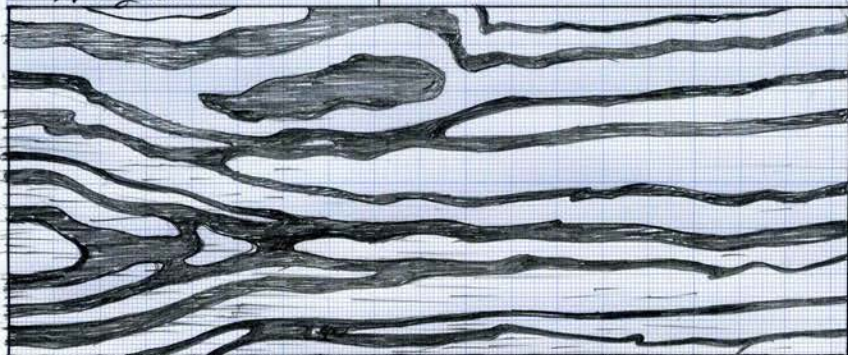




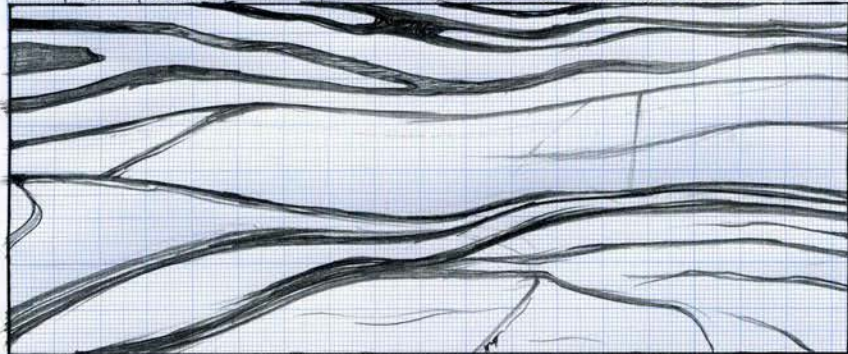
Is it a dream?



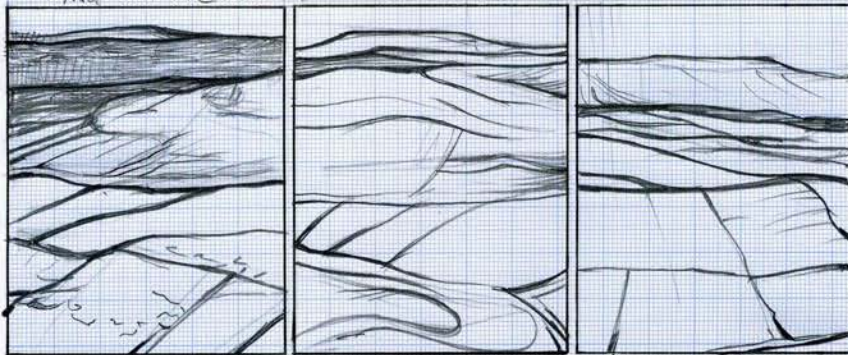
May but the lack of it the dream.



And failing in life's love and wealth a dream



And all the world a dream



The mediating role of the artist . . .

'It's about choices being made, of finding what one can tell . . . and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing"

(Spiegelman:2011:73)

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